

[Three Generations]

26010 Life [Three?] Black & White Couch History - Generations - Miss Shepherd

February 4, 1939.

Life History

Mrs. Thomas Ellington

Kindergarten Teacher

Greenridge Head,

Colonial Manor,

South Jacksonville, Fla.

Rose Shepherd - writer

(Revised)

THREE GENERATIONS - WHITE AND BLACK.

On the last street within the corporate limits of South Jacksonville stands "Red Bank " - an old plantation manor house formerly centering a land grant with a seven-mile frontage on the St. Johns River and a history of continuous ownership of over one hundred years by a family long identified with Duval County.

But an enterprising real estate promoter persuaded the eighty-five year old judge, to whom the property had at last descended, that it would make a fine subdivision. The burden of years resting heavily upon the owner and the price offered being satisfactory, he

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reluctantly parted with his inheritance - his life-long home. Thus "Colonial Manor" - named for the old house - came into being. The magnificent old estate was parcelled off into building lots, and profiting by experience acquired in marketing a previous development on the Southside, the real estate company brought modern machinery and dredging apparatus into the picture, sand and silt was pumped up from the river bed, and the property line frontage was extended more than a hundred feet into the river. So the "Red Bank" manor house which, in the early days was within a stone's throw of the high bank giving the plantation its distinctive name and protecting it from erosion, is now six blocks from the St. Johns.

"Colonial Manor" was popular from the beginning with those wishing to establish themselves as far as possible from the "madding 2 crowd" and yet secure the city facilities of running water, electric light, easy transportation and convenient access to local schools. A distance which in the old days was a three-hour journey on horse-back or by wagon or buggy is now covered by an automobile in twenty minutes.

New homes sprang up throughout the subdivision - bungalows, modern cottages, more pretentious domiciles - yet nobody wanted the old house which stood alone, dignified, massive and substantial representative of an age of construction when a house was a home, and built with even future generations in consideration. A little over a year ago, Mrs. Thomas Irvington realized its possibilities. Having spent her childhood in just such a home on a Georgia plantation, an inheritance of considerable proportions enabled her to justify a longing to again live in a house with twelve foot ceilings, thick walls, deep fireplaces, and spacious rooms. The purchase was made, the deed recorded, and restoration commenced.

The old house has not had its "face lifted," however. It still presents the same solid square front to Ridgewood Road as it did in yesteryears to the sand trail which led to the front porch, a popular meeting place for neighboring plantation owners. Just the weatherboarding has been renewed, the old Colonial door replaced by a new one with a

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brass knocker, and now sash in the twelve-light windows that “four-square” the front with narrow green shutters framing the sides. The eighty-four year old brick made by slaves on the plantation are retained in the partitions, foundations, fireplaces and chimneys.

A double cement driveway leads to the entrance of a two-car garage adjoining the east side of the house. Age-old liveoaks, with here and there a magnolia tree form a guardian-like protection over the house and grounds. Assorted bright blooming azaleas are scattered over the lawn, with red and [pinkkroses?] blooming profusely in their formal beds, outlined with some of the old bricks.

It is 10 o'clock and I am rather surprised to see Mrs. Irvington, broom in hand, sweeping away the small branches, fallen leaves and strands of Spanish moss from the walk and garage door so early in the morning.

“If you don't mind, we'll just go in through the kitchen. It's more convenient.” This seemed a practical idea, since we were now in the garage, and there was no reason for journeying up through the yard to make a formal entrance through the front door.

Up a few wooden steps and we are in the kitchen, a room twenty-five feet square, in the southwest corner of which is a modern oil-burning furnace, automatically clicking and registered the delightful warmth that [pervades?] the interior on this February morning, a little chilly even for Florida. This feature, of course, is an important part of the rejuvenation of the old place.

“You know it has been raining, but the sun is so bright this morning, I just had to get out of doors, besides old Janie who lives a mile to the East of Ridgewood Road is not able to come help me today. She has not been well for some time - you know I brought her down from Georgia when I was married, now nearly twenty years ago. By the way, her grandfather and grandmother were were some of the old family slaves. So the sweeping of the driveway gave me an excuse to get out. In the meantime, my sink full of dishes just

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stands. But I'll have to wash some more later on, so I'll just get them all done up at one time."

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Invited to sit down, I avail myself of the only vacant chair - one of a breakfast set - the others being occupied by parcels of greenery and cut flowers from the florist's.

"I forgot to tell you that the Story Tellers League, of which I am a member, is giving a tea here this afternoon at 4:00, and if it is convenient, I hope you will stay - you'll enjoy it.

"How many are expected? Well, it is a public affair for the purpose of raising funds for our National Convention which is to be held in Jacksonville next fall, so there will probably be around a hundred, or possibly more.

"The decorating committee from the league will be here in a short time, and they will place the flowers and greenery around through the lower rooms."

By this time she had started on the dishes, washing, rinsing and dexterously stacking them on the drainboard. The telephone rang. Across the kitchen, into the hall - "Yes, this is Mrs. Irvington." I heard her tell the part at the end of the 'phone. "No, we will use paper napkins, you do not have to bring linen ones. Yes, everything is in readiness. I see the efficient decorating committee is just coming in the back door. Yes, the refreshment committee has taken care of their part, and tea service is on the table, the tea has been delivered, and the cakes will arrive later. No, you do not need to worry about a thing. "Yes. Thank you. Goodbye."

Back to the sink she comes. "That was Miss McWilliams, the president of the league. She was worrying about napkins. I have ab about ninety, of different sets, most of them hand-embroidered and many of them years' old that I inherited from mother. But Janie does not 'do' hand-embroidery very well, and I just cannot see myself pressing out ninety napkins this morning! Besides, who is 5 there to care or criticize? I like for people to come

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and enjoy my home the same as I do myself and I am sure those modern women would not want to feel there had been a lot of preparation made for their entertainment, which occasioned extra work. A climax came last week, however, when a woman called, saying she was entertaining some out of town friends with a cocktail party, and would I loan her my house, which seemed so well adapted to parties? I never drank accocktail in my life, never went to a cocktail party, and I am still wondering whether it was ignorance or nerve that prompted this woman to ask me such a favor. Of course, I promptly declined, telling her that my house was for my friends and their friends only."

The telephone again. "Yes, Mr. Finkelstein. Oh, I'm so glad. Yes, we'll pick it up. Thank you so much."

A young boy came down the back stairs into the hall and then on into the kitchen. Mrs. Irvington returning, says: "This is Sonny, or otherwise, Thomas, Jr. He is getting ready to go on a tramping trip with members of his Boy Scout Troop."

Sonny starts fortifying himself with a cup of steaming chocolate and a handful of cookies.

"Sonny, you'll have to hurry, so as to be back by 1 o'clock. Daddy will be home by then, to pick you up and go down to Mr. Finkelstein's."

"It's come! The French horn is her! Gosh! I never as saw such a long three weeks."

"Sonny has a musical urge! says Mrs. Irvington. "There's his violin and bugle in those cases by the door, and now he is getting a French horn. I believe he must have an ambition to be a 6 one-man band!

"He belongs to the American Legion band, and this gives him splendid training. There was need of a French horn to round out the musical equipment, and Sonny volunteered to fill the vacancy. We could not obtain such an instrument in Jacksonville, so Mr. Finkelstein ordered it three weeks ago from a New York dealer."

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Sonny looks to be about twelve years of age, but his mother explained he was only eleven, and was in Junior High.” “Yes, he plays the piano a little - not an expert. I taught him,” she answered, when I [asked?] if he was a pianist also.

“John, my oldest boy, is sixteen, and graduates from London High next June. He is more sedate than thomas - wants to be a business man, but we are quite proud of him, too.

“Sonny, you'll have to rush now, or you'll miss the boys. Stay off the main highway, and watch out for automobiles,” she cautioned.

He half runs, half jumps to the back door, and is off through the woods to meet the other Scouts.

Back to the sink. “I feel that on Saturday I can relax. You see through the week I am busy with my twenty kindergartners until non-time, so the mornings are always busy times with me.

“You had better let me help you with the dishes,” I suggested, ““and as we work, we can talk.”

“Now, that is very kind of you. Here is the towel” she takes it off the drying-rack by the furnace. “I'll wash, and you can dry.”

The decorating committee were asking for vases and bowls, low containers, so as not to accentuate the long wall spaces and high ceilings.

“Here is the pantry. Select what you wish.” Everything was 7 in orderly rows and the committee easily made their selections.

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"My kindergarten class - eight boys and twelve little girls - all of pre-school age - comes at 9 o'clock each morning and they stay until noon. Their parents bring them over and call for them when they are ready to go home. I charge \$7.50 per month per pupil.

"You see, when I married the man of my choice, neither of us had much money. Mr. Irvington is a sales representative, and often is out of town for a greater part of the week. I started my work twelve years ago - it was necessary, as my husband works on a part salary-part commission basis - and we needed the money for financial reasons, as we both have plans for special education of our two boys, development along the line of their most pronounced talents - and now the work has become a habit. But I enjoy it, I have a lot of idle time, so why not put it to good use? Yes, the money still comes in handy, as I put most of my inheritance from my mother into this home."

We soon disposed of the dishes and they were arranged in neat piles on the serving table - small plates, cups and saucers - for the tea party.

A glance from a different angle of the room enabled me to observe the careful ordiliness of the big kitchen. There is no gas for household use on the Southside. The Jacksonville Gas Co. has found it too expensive to negotiate the use of conduits for piping gas under the St. Johns' broad expense, and building an auxiliary plant, too, would be an expensive undertaking. Hence, all the kitchen equipment was electrical - a modern range, and beside it an electrical fireless [cooker-?] This makes it easy for this modern wife and mother to cook the meals for a family of four, with the assistance, when able, of old Janie to do the heavy cleaning and laundry work. She is transported back and forth night and morning in a car by some member of the family, to and from her home with another negro family living in a four-room cottage on the old St. Augustine road, about a mile away, where she has a room at a dollar a week. Mrs. Irvington pays her \$5.50 per week, with Thursdays and Sundays off, and gives her most of her food and clothing.

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The color scheme of the kitchen is buff and Chinese red; the linoleum floor covering a combination of these two colors, the curtains of buff, the breakfast-table and chairs the same shade. All chairs have cushions and backs covered with cretonne of buff and red, with a tracery of green.

The wide windows with their deep old fashioned seats at least eighteen inches wide, permitted the light from the east and south to enter, making the room cheerful indeed.

One one window seat, near the fireless cooker, was a well thumbed Bible, mute evidence of the old Southern custom of morning prayers. "Yes," said Mrs. Irvington. "We always start the day with prayer and a reading from the Scriptures. I have been used to it all my life, and it seems better so.

"I'll take those bowls into the dining room, and if you will, you may fill the coffeepot with water and carry it in to the committee to fill the vases and bowls when they put the flowers in so they'll stay fresh for the afternoon. It is easier that way, and less danger of spilling water on the tables - this old furniture spots very easily."

We had now passed the pantry space with its voluminous shelves holding linen and dishes - the racks on the wall holding the family plates, some of which must be very old, and on into the dining-room. The vista presented was breath-taking. The stairway ran to the 9 second floor from the middle of the house, where the walls had been removed, a wide brick arch installed between the dining room and hall, and another on the other side between the living room and hall, throwing the whole lower floor into one long room seventy-five feet by thirty feet wide. The matching Burgundy rags covered the three floor spaces, with matching draperies at the long windows. The floors were of highly polish oak. Throughout with excellent taste was distributed the family furniture, heirlooms from the old Georgian plantation - here a mahogany dining table covered with a hand-made Chinese lace cover; there against the wall a drop-leaf table one hundred and fifty years old; an Italian hand-carved bookcase, centered with a low bowl of red sweet peas and ferns;

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comfortable old chairs, with several of modern type - all blending into a harmonious whole. In the living room and dining room were deep fireplaces, not in use now, of [c urse?], as the modern system of heating with its batteries of ventilators distributes the heat evenly and comfortably.

"Most of this furniture belonged to my mother, who died about two years ago at the age of ninety. She inherited the plantation near Dalton, Georgia from her parents, together with a great deal of this furniture. There my two brothers, four sisters and I were born. I was the youngest of the seven.

"My father ran the neighborhood store. But he was a poor business man and soon failed. Rather than have him go into bankruptcy, my mother used a large portion of her personal fortune to pay off his debts. Then he started another venture, a furniture store in Atlanta, but he died before he attained any measure of success, so my mother sold the plantation and we moved to Atlanta, where she took over the business, managing it with remarkable ability.

"There were nearly five hundred of the seven hundred acres of 10 in cultivation. We raised, cotton, corn, peanuts /tobacco - and there were all kinds of fruits and vegetables for family use. The darkies who did the field work and other work around the place had most of them been born there, and their mothers and fathers before them. You see we were rather a large family. The hands were all paid wages - at the rate of 60 cents a day for the ten men, and 50 cents for the four women, and they all had accounts at the village store in Dalton. Of course, mother had to be responsible for their accounts. Sometimes plantation owners had their money tied up in cultivation of crops and had to wait until cotton, peanuts, tobacco, etc., in season, were marketed before there was money to pay off. But the hands had their own houses, or cabins, there was plenty of ground around each for them to have their own garden, to raise chickens and keep a pig or cow, if they were able, so they never wanted for anything. The account at the store enabled them to purchase clothing, and they had no living expenses such as rent, water, lights, etc., that colored people have to be

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liable for now in towns and cities, where they are engaged in industrial or other day's work. So they were really as well, or better off, than many of their race are now, and for the most part were trusty and reliable. This was in the early 1880's.

"The new owner did not wish to take over the house servants, which presented quite a problem, as there were six of them: An elderly negro man and woman, two younger women, one of them Janie - and two young girls fifteen and eighteen. They had never lived anywhere but at "Whitehall" - that was the name of our place - mother could not turn them loose on the public to make their own way, so nothing undaunted, she gathered them all up and away we went to Atlanta - mother, seven children, and six darkies. Quite a family!

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"We prospered in our new environment. Mother was a good manager, and she had remarkable health. She purchased a house with a large yard in the outskirts of Atlanta, and installed her large family with all our household goods and [gads?!]. The elderly man, Joe, she put in charge of the heavy work around the store, and paid him a dollar a day. The fifteen-year old girl, Susie, she also took to the store, where she was kept busy cleaning and dusting. She was paid a small wage, \$2.50 per week, but had her meals at the house. Old Mammy Liza, Joe's wife, as general [fastetum?] at the house, Janie was cook, Louisa was housekeeper, while Lilly, the eighteen-year old girl, did the family sewing, later making draperies and other fittings for the store, and on customers' orders, when these things became the vogue. None of the house servants were paid wages; they had their own quarters in the big house where they lived their own lives, everything being furnished, and on birthdays and other anniversaries they were given money in addition to presents at Christmas and New Year's.

"We soon adapted ourselves to our surroundings, and while we missed the free life and the 'wide, open spaces' of our old home in the country, we were a jolly crowd, were popular, liked company, and soon made a place for ourselves in Atlanta social life.

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"Mother sent us all to college. My two brothers went to [Suwannee?] - one became a lawyer and the other a banker. Both are living in Alabama. An older sister married and also lives in Montgomery, Alabama.

"I always wanted to teach, so I was sent to Peabody Teachers College in Nashville, Tennessee. However, before our college days, mother saw that we had training for whatever accomplishments we 12 possessed. We were given instruction in voice and piano, and we had trips to New York and other places of interest in the north during vacation periods.

"You see, as we grew up, the negroes of the family grew up, too; as we prospered, so did they, and shared all of our fortunes, as they also shared our misfortunes. I was never allowed to mend a dress, although I was always domestically inclined, and liked especially to be in the kitchen when there were big 'goin's on"-a party, a birthday dinner, Christmas celebrations, weddings - there were five in the big house.

"If I would pick up a garment to mend, Lilly or Louisa would say: 'Now, Miss Margie, just you put that sewin right down. What's us'n goin to do, our black selves, if you 'sist on sewin? You knows pufictly well we can't bide no triflin nigger lazy-bones!'

"I seemed to be Janie's special property. It was music to my ears on a cold morning to hear her soft shuffle on the stairs as she brought up my breakfast, which, at her command, I always ate in bed.

"Spoiled? Yes, they spoiled us, but we all loved one another, so it did not make any difference, after all.

"Do I like to sew and cook now? Yes, it never seemed any trouble for me to learn. You see I was so well taken care of in my younger days. I had plenty of time to observe how things were done, and Janie says I could "always turn my hand' to anything. So, I presume, if I

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have to do a thing, I 'just turn my hand' to it - another way of saying - 'where there's a will, there's a way.'

"I finished college and taught for six years in the Atlanta public school system. Wishing to specialize in kindergarten work, I took a course in Columbia, University, and have a degree from 13 there. This matter of child study is rather an obsession with me. In the meantime, my other sisters married and settled in Georgia, Florida and nearby states.

"Old Joe died, as well as Liza, and later on, Louisa. Mother took them back to the old family burying ground across the road from the old home near Dalton, and there they sleep with several generations of our family. I feel it won't be long before I'll be taking Janie, too. I'll miss her, as she is also a part of my past, which, with a sixteen-year old son, I am beginning to realize is lengthening out!"

Dressed in a heavy pink crepe morning gown, with a cape for extra warmth, which she threw back over her shoulders as she went about the different rooms, moving a jardiniere here, a picture there - the one over the mantel, the large out-door scent of flying wild ducks over the buffet in the dining room, and the smaller flower pictures in the hall - being examples of her skill in painting - I following along, so as not to miss a word - she did not look the age she must be, although the jet black hair now becomingly bobbed is silvering on the crown of her head.

"Mother wa a saint," she reminisced - "if there ever was one. She raised us all with a Bible in her hand. When any of the old families lost one of their number, the preacher always called on mother to lead the prayer offering comfort and consolation to the sorrowing relatives, all of whom she would know. When she died last May, a year ago, every business house in Dalton closed for the day, bank and all, and the whole town turned out for her funeral. This mark of respect is peculiar with old time communities of Georgia, a beautiful custom, in my opinion.

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"She was a remarkable woman, a most beloved mother, a wonderful business woman and although blind during the last three years - she was ninety when she passed on - she kept her hands busy, and this beautiful piece of lace " - (at this she opened a drawer in the buffet and held up a beautiful eight-inch crocheted lace doily) - she made for Sonny as a remembrance. It will be an heirloom which, you may be sure, will be priceless to him.

"Were the negroes ever dumb or sullen? Never! Of course, everyone does things occasionally which provokes those who cannot see their point of view. But white people are like that, too. Your relations, my relations, my neighbors - that's human nature. No one race is altogether bright, none persistently dumb. We are all just human beings. In handling Negroes, however, one must bear in mind they have not much initiative. They have to be told to do a thing, how to do it, and then checked up on, to see how they have accomplished what is wanted.

"I hear Sonny coming back. I'll go and prepare some lunch for you. We are just going to have sandwiches and tea, so as not to have the smell of food in the house when the 'company' comes.

"Talk about dumb things! When I started renovating this old house I was particular, so I thought, not to omit any necessary requirement. It is insulated inside and outside, the walls are eighteen inches thick - easy to keep warm in winter, and the easiest thing in the world to keep cool in summer, but I failed to have a ventilating fan installed over the cooking stove, and with the room all open like they are, all the odor from the cooking simply sails through the house. No one spot or section is impervious. So, you see?

"Oh, yes, here is the schoolroom."

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Behind the French doors leading from the dining room to the west - the river side - was the well arranged kindergarten room, with its small tables, and twenty low chairs. On

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the wall hung the counting boards and charts, and a desk held scissors, colored paper, and other necessary paraphernalia. The room was glassed on three sides, but Venetian blinds tempered the sunlight, now beginning to come in on the south and west. The furniture was all movable and at any time could be taken out and the room converted into a spacious solarium.

"[No?], I'll never give it up." she said, in answer to my question. "I feel this is my work - you know the Lord has a niche for every one, if he only finds it.

I inquired about her system of instructing pre-school children.

"Well, in the first place, I keep a card index of my twenty little pupils, and on each card is a 'case history, so to speak, of each one's daily reactions to approved child methods. The news of these records became noised abroad, and they have been featured in magazine articles and school journals for the benefit of other teachers in this specialized field.

"One thing, I try never to correct a child before others. It spoils their self-respect and tears down their morals. I try to tell a story, the point of which covers his lapse from authority or misconduct, in the hope that he may get it without having to call his attention directly to the subject, and it works!

"My connection with the Story Tellers League has given me a world of prepared stories to feature in this system, and lots of things I just make up to fit the occasion.

"By the way, I have been asked by Peabody College to compile my 'case histories' into a booklet, with some of the character-forming 16 stories I tell my little charges, so it may be distributed to mothers and child-training agencies as a new aid in kindergarten work.

The telephone jingles again. "Yes, Miss Christopher, I do remember you very clearly. (She explains to me in a whisper, it is a young grade teacher she met several months ago, now out of a position). Yes, you are most certainly welcome to come and bring your friend to

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the tea this afternoon, and after everyone leaves, I'll be glad to go into my work with you. Yes, I'll be glad to share my ideas with you - maybe you can improve on them."

Before she leaves the desk, the telephone rings again.

"Yes, Daddy. You are coming right out? Only sandwiches, remember. We can't 'smell' up the house with cooking at this time of the day. Yes, the horn is at Finkelstein's and Sonny is pacing the floor right now, ready to go with you to get it. Listen, Tom, if you are very hungry, please get yourself a good lunch before you come home."

"I am preparing to depart. The decorating committee having completed its work has already gone, leaving the house a bower of tastefully arranged Spring in simple style, so becoming to the old rooms.

"You have not seen the library yet," says Mrs. Irvington. It opens to the east of the living room, with access from the music room, the entrance hall and the kitchen.

"Here's where I live." she laughed. "When things go wrong, and they do go wrong in spite of the 'best laid plans of [nice?] and men,' I like to fly in here and seek comfort from the old classics of song and story.

The large room with its lounge, its comfortable chairs, its carefully planned window arrangements, was lined with shelves from 17 floor to ceiling, and the shelves were filled with books.

At a sound from the hall, I turned to see a black face, wreathed in smiles, peering through the doorway. "Whay you, Miss Margie? Oh, dar you is."

"Why, Janie, I thought you were sick?"

"Yes'm, I is, Miss Margie. I's ha'dly able to get about - a turrible mis'ry in my el' knees, but I jus' had to come to ya' pa'ty."

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"Gone with the wind?" queried Mrs. Irvington to me - "No, I do not believe so. The principles of the old South are still with us, and the new Southerners of the old South have a heritage which will never die. You can acquire polish, poise, [proity?], prosperity - but what is inherited is bred in the bone!

"Well, I inherited Janie, all right. But, I'm glad she came. There is nothing now for her to do, but she loves parties, and I would rather she would be here where she can see everything, than to try to tell her about it afterwards. She would be asking me questions for day on end!

"So sorry you cannot take lunch with us. But come back again when we can have the afternoon to ourselves. I'll cook cabbage on the charcoal pot out in the yard, maybe we can fry some fish, too, and have a regular Florida picnic!

"One thing I know, whatever building engineer figures out a plan and a place to install a ventilating fan in the kitchen, won't be dumb. He'll have to be a heavy thinker and a 'long-header! as Janie says."

And so I left "Red Bank " with two generations of new Southerners installed therein, wondering how they will work out their destinies, and what, too, of the twenty little kindergartners 18 whose fortune brings them into this environment. "Perhaps" - says Mrs. Irvington, "the five-year old who strives to imitate Dillinger and struts about in imaginary defiance of the G-men - which ideas he gets from the 10¢ Saturday children's matinees - may in time yield to the demands of civilized life!

"My son's High School class is giving a dance here next Tuesday night, and I must not forget to run the mop over the floor after the rugs are rolled up. My family just loves to operate the Electra-Lux, so I never have to bother about sweeping, but they are not so keen about the mop," was Mrs. Irvington's parting remark, as if thinking out loud.

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Oh, yes, there were one hundred and twenty interested persons arrived for the Story Tellers' tea, preceded by an entertainment of Valentine stories, and over fifty dollars was cleared for the Convention funds.